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Tombstones of Fallen Heroes

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2009

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MPRA Paper No. 30355, posted 21. April 2011 12:14 UTC

TOMBSTONES OF FALLEN HEROES

• ZULFIQAR ALI KALHORO •

ABSTRACT

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This paper is based on fieldwork which I carried out in Sindh, Pakistan, from December 2007 to February 2008. The main objective of the study was to document and delineate two graveyards and their contents which are located in two different districts of Sindh, one in Thatta and the other in Tando Muhammad Khan. After discussing the origin of the term '*chaukhandi*' as applied to a type of tombs present in the area I present the two graveyards, discussing the meanings of motifs that decorate the tombstones in both places. I also discuss the role of the tribes associated with these graveyards in the tribal history of Sindh and the battles in which they displayed their heroism.

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Keywords: chaukhandi, Sindh, tombstone decoration, tribal history

Introduction

Lower Sindh in southern Pakistan is dotted with many ancient cemeteries boasting the tombs of fallen heroes, and stones erected in memory of their heroism and chivalry (Hero stones). Most of the tombstones bear weaponry depictions symbolizing death in the line of action or at least participation in battle. A distant view of these structures is very pleasing; it appears as if the tombs were rising from a mirage, while closer examination of the designs and intricate carvings engraved on the tombstones reveals a wealth of data about the social history of the region.

In this paper I describe and discuss two such graveyards. The first—which is locally known as the necropolis of Oongar—is located at milestone 101.6, just before the village of Oongar in the district of Thatta, province of Sindh (home to a large number of historical and archaeological sites). The necropolis of Oongar, one among many, can be approached either from Karachi via the town of Thatta or from Hyderabad on the Thatta road. The second necropolis, a Jats burial site, is located fifty kilometres from the city of Hyderabad, close to the Buddhist stupa of Sudheran in the district of Tando Muhammad Khan, also in Sindh. This district lies on the Hyderabad-Badin road. From the city of Tando Muhammad Khan, one can reach the Jats necropolis via the village of Saeedpur Takar. These graveyards have not been thoroughly studied before, receiving only passing mention from the scholars in their research works (Zajadacz-Hastenrath 2003; Hasan 1996; Lashari 1996), yet they are notable for the figural representations that decorate them—inconsistent, of course, with the Islamic prohibition of such images. I developed my interest in *chaukhandi* tombs during my field research into horse representations on these tombs and on Hero stones in south western Sindh in 2000, when I came across a number of *chaukhandi* tombs bearing depictions of animals, humans, jewellery and weaponry.

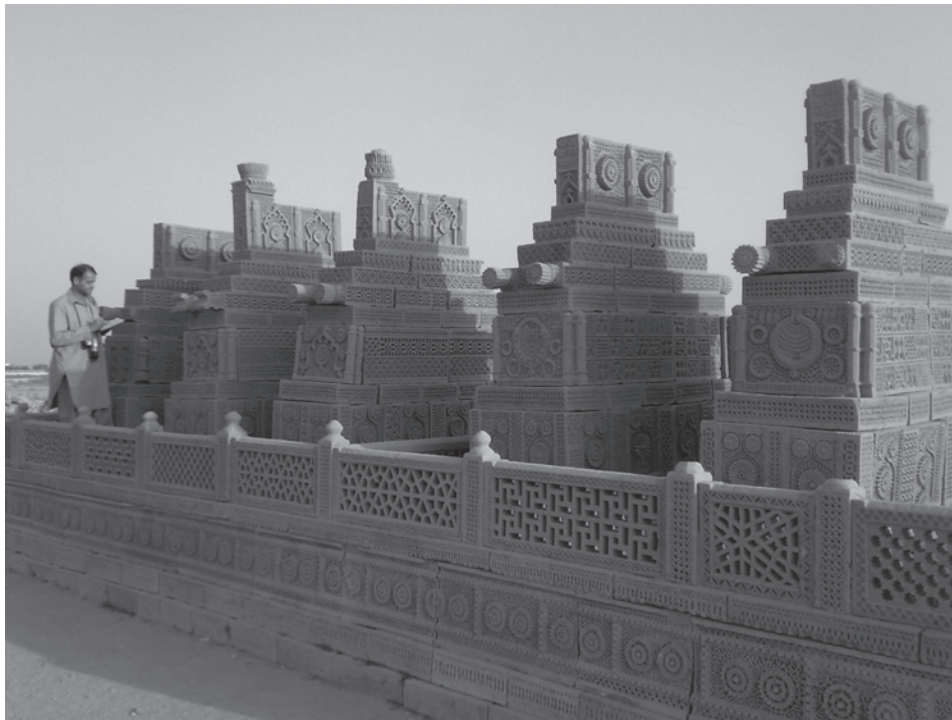
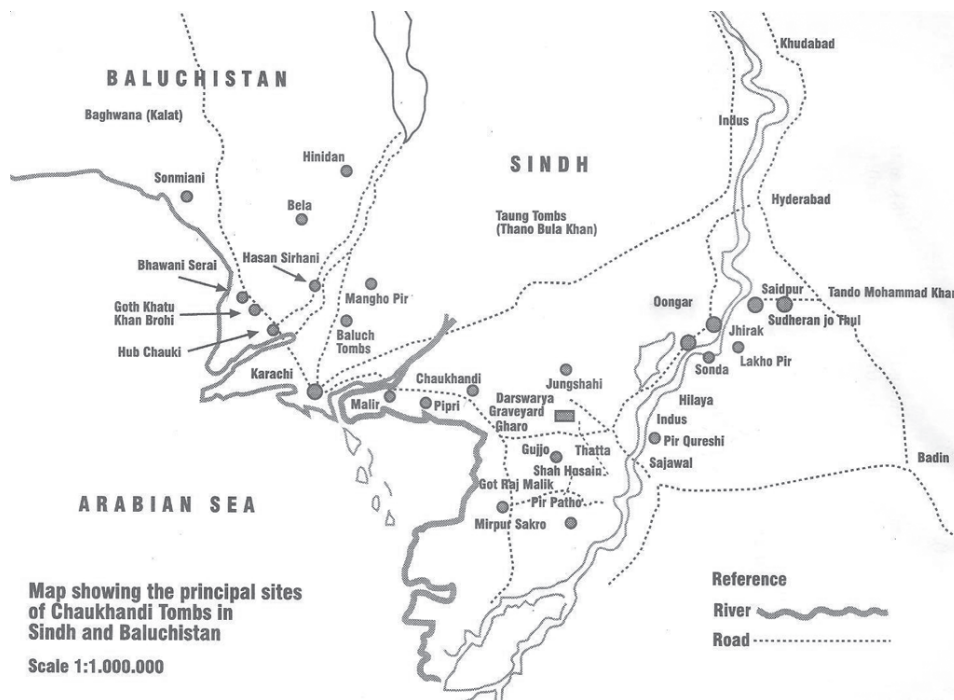


Figure 1. View of tombs at the Chaukhandi necropolis near Karachi, after which tombs of this style may be named

Chaukhandi tombs have no parallel in the Subcontinent and Islamic world (Zajadacz-Hastenrath 2003) and are only found in the provinces of Baluchistan and Sindh in Pakistan. The earliest passing reference to *chaukhandi* is available in a letter which one J. Macleod addressed to H. Bartle Frere (British colonial administrator in India) in 1851 (Hasan 1996: 1). The tombs were then given serious attention by H.D. Baskerville, Assistant Collector of Thatta in the district of Karachi in 1917. Similar tombs were also reported from several other places in Sindh and Baluchistan by foreign explorers (M.A. Vogel 1902–3; Holdich 1910; Cousens 1975). The best known are those found at the necropolis in the village of Chaukhandi, Karachi (the Chaukhandi Tombs), which may have provided the name for this style of mortuary structure (see discussion below).¹ The tombs at Oongar came into the limelight when the late Zahid Husain, Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, spotted them while travelling back from Thatta to Karachi sometime in 1953. It was he who urged that the Department of Archaeology take suitable measures for the protection of *chaukhandi* tombs in general (Hasan 1996: 2), and rubbings of their stone carvings soon began to raise interest amongst scholars at home and abroad. Currently, this type of funerary art occupies an important position in the archaeology of Pakistan in general and Sindh in particular, and an English translation by Michael Robertson (2003) of the German work by Salome Zajadacz-Hastenrath on *chaukhandi* tombs marks a watershed for those who are interested their study.



(Permission to publish has been granted by Shaikh Khurshid Hasan, author of *Chaukhandi Tombs in Pakistan* 1996.)

Historical and iconographic description

Various terms are used by scholars for all the tombstones located in different parts of Sindh and Baluchistan including *chaukhandi*, *rumi* or *shami* and *ghariyoon* (the chiselled ones). According to Shaikh Khurshid Hasan, who has served in the Department of Archaeology as Assistant Director, Deputy-Director, Director and Director General, tombs built in reducing tiers in pyramidal form are generally known as '*chaukhandi* tombs', noting, however, that there is a lot of controversy regarding the exact connotation of the term. Some scholars believe that Chaukhandi, the village near Karachi where the dignitaries of the Jokhia tribe are buried, provided a name for the style of tombs. Others take it to be an architectural term meaning a pavilion with four or more pillars supporting a *chatri* or a dome (Hasan 1984: 190). Baloch (2004) suggests that the term literally means "four-walled enclosure open from above". In the cultural traditions of Sindh the only 'four-walled enclosure' entitled to be called a *chaukhandi* is one which is constructed, out of respect, around the grave of a revered person and hence carries the sense of being sacrosanct (Baloch 2004: 193). However, Mumtaz Hasan (1968) argues that the meaning of the word *chaukhandi* is used in the source texts to describe a four-cornered or four-pillared pavilion. Accordingly, he believes that the name *chaukhandi*, which has attached itself to the village near Karachi, originally referred to the canopy-structures (*chattris*) or *chaukhandis* in the cemetery.

According to Nath, *chawkhandi* is a vernacular (*bhasha*) term, derived from the Sanskrit *chaturkhanda* which means four-storeyed, *khanda* technically denoting a storey in the vertical section. It also means 'section' and by usage it connotes 'side', thus *chawkhandi* may denote a four-sided, square, or rectangular building (Nath 1993: 342), common during the medieval period throughout India (Nath: 344). Differentiating between a *chattari* and a *chawkhandi*, Nath writes that the latter (from the middle of the seventeenth century) was used as an historical memorial, while the former assumed a funereal character and became a distinguished class of post-Mughul architecture, viz Rajput sepulchral architecture. He assumes that a Rajput *chattari* was technically a 'tomb', while a *chawkhandi* was a monument in the real sense of the term. Yet another scholar, Brohi (1998), thinks that it is very likely that the name *chowkhanda* has erroneously stemmed from *jakhundi* memorials raised to the memory of warriors who sacrificed their lives in the battle field for the sake of their country or tribe (Brohi 1998: 172). Scholars generally assume that the *chawkhandi* tombs originated in the fourteenth century and continued to be used up to the middle of the twentieth century (Brohi 1998; Lashri 1996; Khurshid Hasan 1996; Zajadacz-Hastenrath 2003).

The terms *rumi* (Turkish) and *shami* (Syrian) refer to two types of burial. Conducting his research at Hinidan and other cemeteries in 1845, Vogel was the first person who attempted to explain the terms, suggesting that *rumi* refers to underground burial and *shami* to an above ground mode of interment (Vogel 1902–3: 215). However, according to Baloch (2004), the name *rummyun* was originally used for those tombs which were not only engraved, but also had a typical structural form resembling a *rummi* (a local cupping instrument). Furthermore, the word *rummyun* was conveniently pronounced as *roomiyun* (plural of *roomi*), particularly in literate circles, in view of the implicit artistic connotation. Against the background of the Persian literary tradition widely prevalent in Sindh and Baluchistan until the 1920s, the term *roomi* was seen as reminiscent of *naqsh-i-Rumi* or *naqsh-o-nigaar-i-Roomi*, meaning "unexcelled Roman (Greek) art design" (Baloch 2004: 194).

The iconography of the tombs is varied: *chawkhandis* for males are usually decorated with carvings of riders and weapons, whereas women's tombs carry images of jewellery. In addition, depictions of animals and birds can be found—particularly of snakes, peacocks, buffalos, camels and roosters. Geometrical and floral designs along with calligraphy and epigraphy also appear on the *chawkhandi* tombs. Brohi (1998) has attempted to interpret some of the depictions, making the following suggestions: 1) the souls of the deceased are sometimes symbolized as birds on the monuments, especially doves or *bulbuls* (nightingales); 2) mounted figures are emblematic of the souls of the deceased, represented in the noblest aspect they assumed during life; 3) shields have been used as symbols of protection received from gods, thereby acknowledging their assistance (mostly on monuments to soldiers). Furthermore, Brohi believes that a horse is a well-known funeral emblem, indicative of the passage from one state of existence to another. Since figurative depictions are inconsistent with an Islamic ban on pictures, Vogel attempted to explain them in terms of Hindu influences. He considers *sati* stones used in various Himalayan states, on which the deceased is depicted in relief, as a possible source (Vogel 1902–03: 215). Cousens (1975) referred to the model of *sati* stones used in Kathiawar and Kutch (India)—geographically nearer.

In this paper I use the term *chawkhandi* to refer to tombstones which are locally called *gharriyoon* (the chiselled ones) or *pathar-jun-qabroon*, and *chattari* for a tomb pavilion or

canopy. I commence with the necropolis of Oongar, where the tombstones were erected for the fallen heroes of the eighteenth-century battle of Siri (or Oongar). In addition to these heroes, the necropolis also contains the tombstones of the dignitaries of the Burfats and the Jakhara. After describing the battle of Siri, I will move on to discuss the tombstones and canopies of the Burfat and the Jakhara tribes. The second necropolis under discussion is a Jats cemetery near Sudheran Jo Thull in the district of Tando Muhammad Khan, where Jats who fell in the battle of Siri were taken for burial, to join Jats who fell in the tribal battle of Jats versus Changs in 1786.

The battle of Siri (or Oongar) and the necropolis of Oongar

During the rule of Mian Ghulam Shah Kalhoro (1758–1772) many tribes rose to prominence in the bucolic areas of Karachi and Thatta; some even enjoyed a prestigious position at the Kalhora court (Lakho 2004). At that time, the Jokhias, the Burfats, the Lasharis and Kalmatis² were powerful tribes, playing a very significant role in the socio-political history of Sindh during the rules of Kalhoras and Talpurs, who used them to further their political ambitions. Even the great Mughals had to rely on these tribes for the safety of the caravans which used to pass through their respective territories. The Jokhias, who claimed Rajput ancestry (Brohi 1998: 167), engaged in battles with almost every tribe in order to display their chivalry and valour. Legend has it that the Jokhias migrated from Nawabshah,³ probably in the thirteenth century, to other parts of Sindh. Some families of Jokhias settled in the mountainous areas near the shrine of Shah Bilawal Noorani (Jokhio 1992: 24). Afterwards, they migrated and settled on the banks of the Hub and attacked and snatched the areas of Malir from the Kalmatis, thus backing them into corner. A number of battles were fought between the Kalmatis and the Jokhias—in which the Jokhias were largely victorious—and the Burfats and the Jokhias, in which the reverse held true.

The chief of the Jokhias, Jam Bijar Khan, had the backing of Mian Ghulam Shah Kalhoro who used him against those tribes and individuals who declined to accept his authority (Brohi n.d: 193); this enabled Jam Bijar to occupy many areas which previously were under the dominion of the Kalmatis. Finally, Jam Bijar Khan Jokhio set his eyes on the Siri Jagir (*jagir*—piece of territory) that belonged to the Burfat tribe. In the battle of Siri, that drew in the Jats, the Kalmatis and the Jakhra in support of the Burfats, Jam Bijar Jokhio showed the green flag of truce to lull his enemies into a false sense of security before launching his attack and winning the war by deceit. The Jats who died in the battle were taken for burial to a cemetery in the district of Tando Muhammad Khan, discussed below, while those who belonged to the Jakhra and the Burfat tribes were buried in the necropolis of Oongar.

The necropolis is spread over ten acres and is home to a number of dilapidated and dislodged tombstones, decorated slabs of which are strewn on the ground. There are more than twenty *chaukhandi* tombs and two severely damaged *chataris* (tomb pavilions) in the cemetery. Most of the *chaukhandis* bear figurative depictions of equestrians and weaponry such as shields, axes and spears. Scattered slabs from a number of graves may be seen in Figures 2 and 3, surrounded by further dislodged slabs lying all around the structures. On all may be seen the images of scimitar and shield, along with a variety of other weapons.



Figure 2. Weaponry depictions on *chaukhandi* tombs in the necropolis at Oongar



Figure 3. A dislodged gravestone showing a finger ring weapons

There are more weaponry depictions on the tombstones in the necropolis of Oongar than in other graveyards in Sindh. Almost all the *chaukhandi* tombs in this necropolis are decorated with weaponry depictions, as almost all belong to the fallen heroes of the battle of Siri.

Mostly, the weaponry depictions appear below the headstone of the tomb though there is no hard rule for the distribution of reliefs. Images of weapons may occupy either an independent slab or be depicted along with horse and rider representations and so on. Sometimes, one finds weapons in the areas on the post underneath the boss on one side, with the rider on the other. For example, on the gravestone belonging to a completely collapsed tomb at Jerruck dating from the third quarter of the sixteenth century, the horse in the image is placed diagonally. On its back, the rider is shown in standing position. He is holding a spear and the reins in his right hand, while a quiver is coarsely depicted to his left, and another unrecognizable object at the horse's feet. In the area beneath this depiction, there is another relief, left with only the outlines carved, showing a shield with a sword and a scimitar crossed behind it (Zajadacz-Hastenrath 2003: 85–86).

Apart from representations of weapons, geometrical and floral designs are also found on the tombs. As far as geometric patterns are concerned, crosses, squares, pentagons, hexagons, octagons with a star shape or contained in circles, chevron lines, strip patterns and amulet patterns are found on the tombs. Apart from the *chaukhandi* tombs, the amulet pattern can also be found on the interior of the lintel of an unidentified *chatari* in the necropolis. Among floral designs, the lotus seems to have been the favourite flower of the builders and is profoundly sculpted on the gravestones, though sunflower motifs can also be found on these tombs. Very salient is the motif of *charpy/khat* (decorative bed posts) which is also commonly depicted on the tombs in the graveyard.

In addition to the *chaukhandi* tombs, there are also two *chataris* in the cemetery which are half buried beneath mud, one of which is severely damaged. Architecturally speaking, the latter resembles the tomb pavilions of the Samma dynasty at Makli, but is less ornamented. Only three pillars of the canopy have survived. Some of the architectural elements of the canopy have probably been taken away by local people and only three or four decorated slabs are lying around the site in addition to some pillars and lintels. Adjacent to this is another canopy or tomb pavilion, supposed by local people to be that of Darya Khan Burfat who died in the battle of Siri; it is also half buried under the mud (see Fig. 4). Only the shafts and the dome of the canopy are exposed. The canopy is eight-pillared, built in a square plan superimposed by a hemispherical dome topped with a finial. The plaster of the dome has peeled off thus exposing it to further vagaries of weather. The octagonal shafts of the canopy are decorated with chevron designs and the four bracket capitals also are ornamented. The *chajja*, (dripstone) and carved *kangura* (battlement parapet) add beauty to this crumbling canopy. However, some parts of the dripstone and battlement parapet have collapsed.



Figure 4. So-called canopy of Darya Khan Burfat

Necropolis of Jats

Like other districts of Sindh, Tando Muhammad Khan is also home to a number of historical graveyards. However, the graveyard of the Jats located some 20 kilometres south of Tando Muhammad Khan near the famous Buddhist stupa of Sudheran is quite prominent, perched atop the hill overlooking the railway line that connects Tando Muhammad Khan with Hyderabad.

Shail Mayaram (2003) notes that the Mid and Jat—the two major migratory groups of north western India between the seventh and eleventh centuries—divided the region among themselves and frequently fought each other. Arab sources suggest that the frequent Mid and Jat raids on seaports and the maritime trade of the Persian Gulf and the western Indian Ocean were the reason for the Arab conquest of Sindh. Gardizi (Persian geographer and historian of the early eleventh century) describes the ‘al-Mayd’ and the ‘al-Zutt’ as sea pirates of the coastal region from Daybul (originally Debal) to Kathiawar. Although Jats tribe members in lower Sindh have raised buffalos in recent times, most Jats are known as camel breeders. Local custom has it that anybody holding the bridle of a camel is a Jat. In fact, some people consider Jats to be their own caste. Others believe that they owe their name to their profession.

During the reigns of the Kalhoras (1700–1783) and the Talpurs (1783–1843), the Jats were the most powerful tribe in parts of lower Sindh; in order to rein them in, Mir Fateh Ali Khan (founder of the Talpur dynasty) openly supported the rival Chang tribe, forcing the Jamalis and the Khosas into alliance with them. However, in almost every encounter, the Changs and their supporters faced humiliation. Discord culminated in a battle known

as *Jatan ain Changan Jo Maro* (The Battle of the Jats and Changs) which took place in 1786 A.D. The annals of Sindh record that the final dispute began when a Jat woman killed a Chang man by hitting him hard with cooking pot over an issue of molestation. In retaliation, some people of the Chang tribe killed a brother of the Jat woman. The Jats also quickly struck back and killed three Changs, which was followed by a series of clashes and encounters between the two tribes, eventually leading to tribal war. All the Jats of lower Sindh and Kutch came to support the Sardar Sher Khan Jat, then the chief of the Jats and the enemies met on the battle ground in the purlieus of the town of Jati and fought valiantly. However, the Jats displayed more skills in wielding the sword and greater heroism in battle and were victorious; the Changs and their supporters retreated from the battle ground and turned their swords into ploughshares. (Baloch 2005: 356–358)

The war ballads of the battle are still known to many bards living in lower Sindh and Tharparkar who entertain people with rhythmic narrations, meticulously eulogizing the gallantry and heroism of the individuals concerned. Scrupulous records have been kept of every Jats lineage which engaged in the battle, the most notable of which were Othar (camelmen or camel breeders), Thatiar (buffalo raisers), Mithanis, Radho, Hamrani and Halani. Folk story tellers also narrate the names of individuals of both tribes who fought bravely in the battle. Those who died were buried in different graveyards in the districts of Badin, Thatta and Tando Muhammad Khan. The people of the Chang tribe were buried in the graveyards of Ram Baraho in Badin and in the battle ground which is known as *Jatan and Chagan Ja Der* in Jati (a necropolis that contains communal graves of both Changs and Jats). Some Jats were taken for burial to the necropolis of Jats near Sudheran-Jo-Thul in Tando Muhammad Khan which is the site discussed in this report. The Jats tombstones in this burial ground are famous in the region for their engravings because there is no other necropolis which contains decorated tombstones in the surroundings. Locally, these tombstones are called *chaukhandis* tombs of Jats, with local interpretation of the term merely being any tomb which has four corners. The decorations on the Jats *chaukhandis* include geometric and floral designs but figural representations also appear, illustrating the aesthetic of the builders who seem to have drawn on local themes for their artistic expression.

The graveyard contains more than twenty *chaukhandi* tombs, of which some are ornately carved and carry excellent representations of mounted warriors, weapons and jewellery. These *chaukhandi* tombs are four to six feet high though there are some graveyards in Sindh—notably at Taung in the district of Jamshoro—where there are many *chaukhandi* tombs higher than fifteen feet. Some of the tombs at the necropolis of the Jats also carry epigraphs. The decorated slabs of tombstones (see Fig. 5) are strewn everywhere in the necropolis and some even beyond the limits of the graveyard, vandalized by rapacious people in the hope of finding treasure believed to be hidden underneath such imposing structures.

On one of the destroyed gravestones there is an elaborately carved camel depiction, indicating that the buried dignitary belonged to the Jat community and was a camel breeder and tender. On another slab one can find a depiction of a mounted warrior which is very skilfully worked. There are some gravestones which depict weapons, a dismantled slab, for example, bearing the representation of a sword with shield. On another gravestone, one finds the representations of a dagger, sword with shield and an axe. Local people hold that some of the slabs showing weapons and riders have been taken away by government officials.



Figure 5. Dilapidated *chauhhandi* tombs in the necropolis of the Jats

There are more than six *chauhhandi* tombs which depict jewellery and therefore belong to women. It was the custom among the tribes to bury their men and women in the same necropolis; women were given space near their deceased husbands or sons. There is a variety of jewellery chiselled into the dislodged slabs scattered through the necropolis; for instance, the centre of the panel in Figure 6 is occupied by a necklace. Above this there is the *sanghar patti* (head ornament with pendants) mostly worn by Jat women; two nose rings are depicted close to the pendants of the *sanghar patti* and two pairs of bracelets on each side of it; three finger rings appear on each side of the necklace.

On another gravestone, there are two bracelets enclosed in floral-shaped pattern with two finger rings symmetrically arranged on the upper and lower edges of the slab. On the dislodged panel lying between two tombstones, there are two bracelets with strikingly designed pommels. One can also find many depictions of jewellery on the *chauhhandi* tombs located in the graveyards at Raj Malik Dars Warayo, Shah Hussain and Sonda, in the district of Thatta, Chaukhandi in the district of Karachi and at Taung in the district of Jamshoro.⁴

Conclusion

The tombstones in both graveyards discussed above bear weaponry depictions. However, one finds a much larger number of these on the *chauhhandis* in the necropolis at Oongar and, comparatively speaking, representations on gravestones at Oongar are more refined. There are only two or three gravestones at the necropolis of the Jats where one finds depictions of weapons while, on the tombstones in the necropolis at Oongar, almost all the



Figure 6. A panel showing various items of jewellery in the necropolis of the Jats

tombs bear weaponry depictions, evidence of the deaths in the battle of Siri of most of those interred there. When tombstones and canopies were erected by their descendents, the motifs of weapons bore testimony to the fact that they were valiant and patriotic warriors who sacrificed their lives while defending their mother land. The jewellery depictions on women's *chaukhandis* are commonly found in the necropolis of the Jats whereas at Oongar there are only two graves bearing jewellery depictions. One finds inscriptional slabs lying all over the site at the cemetery of the Jats but it is difficult to find any inscriptions at all at the Oongar necropolis since all of the *chaukhandis* have disintegrated and not a single tombstone is in its original condition.

As well as containing items of rare beauty and craftsmanship, rapidly deteriorating, these sites, and burial grounds more generally in Sindh, are repositories of valuable cultural and social history in the area. The figural designs, which run counter to Muslim orthodoxy with regards such images, bear an unusual testimony to a cultural practice which has since disappeared; the evidence should be protected from the irreversible impact of both environmental conditions and voracious humans. According to the notables of Oongar, village people have purportedly removed many of the decorative slabs either to sell in the lucrative markets in such items or simply in order to decorate their drawing rooms with these valuable pieces of art. The concerned authorities should arrest the decay and destruction of these valuable pieces of art and should restore them to their original glory. Through restoration, we can preserve the visual heritage for future generations.

NOTES

¹ The site known as the Chaukhandi Tombs, Karachi, was placed on the World Heritage Tentative List in 1993. While the cemeteries discussed in this paper are not, perhaps, of quite the same unique value as the 'original' Chaukhandi Tombs, they nonetheless represent a cultural and historical heritage that demands attention and preservation from further deprivations.

² For further information on the Jokhias, Burfats, Lasharis and Kalmati tribes, please see the respective chapters in Hasan 1996, and on Jokhia see the articles (1) Jokhia and Waghera Tribal States and (2) Origin of Jokhia—A Rajput clan? in Brohi n.d. and 1998.

³ There are still some villages in Nawabshah district, particularly in Sakrand tehsil, amongst which Satpuri is the prominent village, where the Jokhias live in considerable numbers. During my official survey on the Crop Maximization Project (CMP), I came across some elders of the community who have preserved their tribal history in their memory which has come down to them from oral traditions.

⁴ This information is based on my field visits to above-mentioned cemeteries.

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